

## Civil War Book Review

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## Review

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**Watson, Ritchie Devon, Jr.** *Normans and Saxons: Southern Race Mythology and the Intellectual History of the American Civil War.* Louisiana State University Press, \$40.00 hardcover ISBN 9780807133125

### How Southerners Viewed Race

Ritchie Devon Watson, Jr.'s longstanding interest in the culture, history, and literature of the white South is reflected in previous publications such as *The Cavalier in Virginia Fiction* (1985) and *Yeoman Versus Cavalier* (1993). In *Normans and Saxons* he offers a journey through the polemical landscape of an increasingly divided nation in the years before and during the Civil War. While certainly crediting material circumstances such as the differing labour systems of North and South with precipitating the conflict, Watson is most concerned with presenting and interpreting the ways in which each section's cultural and intellectual life reflected and fueled intensifying political and cultural, and then military, conflict.

Watson begins the book with a reading of "The Brooks-Sumner Caning Incident" in 1856 as a means to suggest how intense sectional conflict had become by that point as well as how much hardening cultural assumptions shaped each section's view of the conflict. Chapters include a reading of Walter Scott's influence on southern thinkers and writers and a fascinating discussion of poetry produced during the civil war. Overall, the work provides an excellent sense of the building tensions of the period and of the many ways in which they blended, culture, memory, history, and race to tell their stories of superiority and justification. Much of the focus within this larger account is on what Watson calls "race mythology" and "racial mythmaking" in both North and South, with most attention given to the intellectuals of the slave states.

Watson's most original interpretive claim is announced by the book's title. Watson argues that elite white southerners' thinking on sectional difference went

so far as to develop a theory of racial difference dividing white southerners and white northerners. Watson goes beyond the acknowledged importance of "racial" differences between white and black in the slaveholders' justification of slavery. He insists that some thinkers developed a similarly pseudo-scientific argument, drawing on theories of polygenesis becoming current at the time, to explain the growing conflict between northern and southern states. He further argues that this argument had wide resonance among the planter elite. This argument, Watson argues, posited a "racial" distinction among white Americans, contrasting the Normans of the South with the Saxons of the North. By the 1850s, "some of Dixie's defenders" Watson believes, "had moved beyond the, by then, widely held assumption that "America was composed of two distinct peoples and two different cultures," to argue "that [white] northerners and southerners represented ... two scientifically distinct races" (17). The predominance of this strain of slaveholder thinking was short-lived, according to Watson, rising in the 1850s to become a "staple" of southern polemics but barely surviving the Civil War. Watson himself does not credit such a claim, of course, but he does argue that a significant number of white southerners did, as the polemicists "effectively employ[ed]" their argument in favour of "the dawn of a new southern race and a new slaveholding nation" (18).

The primary evidence presented in support of this central pillar of Watson's book is very limited. Watson writes of the region's leading periodicals such as *De Bow's Review* and the *Southern Literary Messenger* "trumpeting" the theory in the years before the war. Yet he presents only a handful of direct citations to support his main claim for the existence, far less the increasing influence, of the Norman-Saxon race myth in the polemical repertoire of slavery's defenders. For example, a chapter on "Race Mythology, Science, and Southern Nationalism" cites about a dozen articles from southern periodicals, only two of which can be read as directly supporting Watson's thesis regarding the prevalence and significance of the Norman race myth in elite thought.

Even in the evidence Watson presents, terms such as "Cavalier," "Puritan," and "Yankee" are far more frequently employed to suggest profound differences of culture and character, but rarely to indicate a belief in the kind of racial difference for which Watson argues. Further, the wide-ranging sweep of Watson's discussion of the eclectic invective drawn on by southerners and northerners itself casts doubt on his claims for the Norman-Saxon race argument as something new, distinct, and important. Terms such as noble or base, benevolent or benighted, brave or cowardly, honorable or dishonorable abound,

all suggesting a shared ideal of "civilized" human behaviour from which one or other has fallen short, rather than offering evidence for a belief in racial distinctiveness. Often, the supposedly "racial" use of the Norman and Saxon categories is conflated with or linked to the far more common use by both sides of terms such as Cavalier and Puritan.

Such conflations and elisions were common among the writers Watson studies, raising the question of what they really meant on the occasions they used the term race in defining the sectional divide. Did they really mean by "race" a scientifically distinct category with a defined meaning (a meaning understood and shared by their peers)? Or did they use the term more loosely, as a synonym for "people" or "nation" or "culture"? There is much in the book to suggest, at least to this reader, the latter interpretation. For one example among many, Watson notes with regard to the writers of the South Carolina secession manifesto that they used "people" rather than "race" but he nevertheless insists that "the distinction was probably not a significant one" because "the frequently bruited assertions of southern difference, southern grandeur, and southern nationalism . . . Resonated fully with the Norman-Saxon racial theory that had become a staple of southern polemical writing in the 1850s" (135-36). Watson's interpretation implies that such was the ubiquity of the race argument by this point that words like "people," "nationalism," and "difference" were now read in its light. That 'race' was one more synonym, perhaps with an extra combative edge, for intensifying differences seems more plausible.

Watson does draw on theorists of race such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, but his thesis might have been strengthened by a more developed discussion of the meanings of "race" for the people being studied. He posits a shift from "traditional" views of race based on such things as "environmental forces" to a new understanding of race in the nineteenth-century as being the "result of biological inheritance" (34). However, while Watson offers ample evidence for the growing importance of this "science" in asserting differences between black people and white people, much of his evidence regarding differences among whites suggests the continued use of "race" in the "traditional" rather than the "scientific" sense.

*Normans and Saxons* engages in significant ways with a variety of major topics of interest to current students of southern history, literature and culture, including the nature of gender relations within the planter class, class relations among white southerners, the relationship of material interests to cultural choices

and intellectual positions, and the inter-relationships of “race,” “identity,” “memory” and “nationalism.” Yet in doing so it would have benefited from a fuller engagement with recent literature on these and other subjects. It cites only three books published in this century—Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s *The Shaping of Southern Culture* (2000), Michael O’Brien’s *Conjectures of Order* (2003), and Elizabeth Fox Genovese’s and Eugene D. Genovese’s *The Mind of the Master Class* (2005) (wrongly cited in the notes as *The Mind of the Planter Class*)—and fewer than twenty works from the last two decades, years rich in publications on many issues addressed by Watson. If recent literature is not relevant, given its apparent similarities of concern, that itself would be worthy of mention and discussion. The absence of a bibliography is unhelpful.

*Normans and Saxons* draws an atmospheric picture of the increasingly poisonous public landscape of the 1850s and the war years. When we read with Watson’s help the violence of the words and imagery employed we better understand the unrelenting violence and brutality of the war fighting itself. The intensity of the contempt, the depth of the divide, is clear to see. The enmity was so powerful, the differences of economy, culture and politics so profound that white southerners and northerners had no need to generate a myth of membership in distinct white races either to justify their own righteousness or to condemn the malevolence of their foes. That is just as well, as *Normans and Saxons* falls far short of making a persuasive case for any such development.

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